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ABSTRACT

A recent study on the free selection of library books for recreational silent reading periods focused on the difficulty of material chosen and on the relationship between the students' reading ability and the readability of a book. Three groups of 24 students completed an interest inventory form, and their reading ability, sex, and reading interest areas were recorded. One week later, the students' library books were analyzed for readability and then returned to the student; two weeks later, students were questioned to insure the status of the reading of the selected books. This process was repeated three times. Findings indicated no significant relationship between students' reading ability, sex, or stated interest area, and their ability to choose reading materials at levels appropriate to their reading ability. Also, there was no significant tendency in free selection for students to choose books within their stated interest areas. Results suggest school librarians should be aware that students tend to choose books with readability levels and topics that differ from their tested reading abilities and stated interest areas. (SRT)

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Elementary Students' Self Selection
of Reading Material in School Libraries

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Running head: SELF SELECTION

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Elementary Students' Self Selection
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Reading programs involving free choice of school library materials are becoming increasingly common (Houle, 1984). Teachers are often made to feel that a free reading period (USSR) is essential if their students are to progress successfully on the reading skill continuum. The free choice selection process is certainly being used but perhaps without full knowledge of some of the implications inherent in its use.

Aristotle's concept of having to be actively involved in the learning process to acquire an ease in application of a skill is easily applied to the process of reading (Howie, 1968). This view is used to justify sustained silent reading activities which include free choice of reading materials as one of their attributes. Silent reading programs based on the principles of free choice and learning by doing have become daily occurrences in many schools and classrooms. "After all," teachers say, "the students probably never do get a chance to read at home." Without such justification teachers would be hard pressed to explain the lack of direct interaction and "teaching" activity on their part, during a free reading period, to administrators and the public.

The teachers' point is well made as free reading periods probably do offer many students their only used opportunity to engage in recreational reading. Few, if any, would deny that

practice brings proficiency, but what if the wrong things are being practised? As Burnett (1975) points out bad readers tend to practise bad habits when they read. Thus the assumption cannot be made, for them, that everyone learns to read by reading (Smith, 1973). By the same token, if material is too difficult for even the best of readers, progress could also be impeded. Without the necessary skills to read more difficult material, students may adopt inappropriate methods of dealing with the content and practise them. The reverse situation may also be a factor in allowing students' free selection of materials for sustained silent reading programs. If material is chosen that is below a student's reading ability, how will daily reading of that material aid the student in improving his skills? The question is not whether or not there should be daily reading periods, but rather how materials should be selected for those periods.

In order to attempt to answer some of the questions raised by the free selection of library books, the author investigated the answer to two basic questions. The first question was related to attempting to determine what difficulty of material is chosen by students in a free choice situation, and the second, to investigating the relationship between a student's reading ability and the readability of a book selected.

There is a dearth of research related to the purpose of this investigation, although there are many studies which examine

interest areas in relation to sex, age, recreational reading, developmental stages and comprehension. Numerous studies also exist using quantity reading as a measure of interest (Manning, 1984). There appear to be no studies combining the concepts of free choice, reading level and reading ability.

Sauls' study (Sauls, 1974), for example, concluded that subjects with better comprehension read more than those in the lower comprehension ranges, girls read more than boys, and those with a positive attitude toward reading read more than those without. The study depended on survey diaries kept by each subject. No mention of the reading levels of materials purportedly being read is made and no check of whether they were actually read is included.

While Burnett (1975) contends that self selection may be counterproductive for poorer readers, others such as Duker (1968) and Fader (1976) are of the opinion it is not. Duker remarks that as long as the freedom to return the book selected is present, self selection is fine for those choosing more difficult books. He is joined in that philosophy by Trusty (1971) who feels that children will say a book is too hard if their status and ego are not threatened by a group situation. Fader espouses the view that high interest will enable the reader to manage the material.

King has come close to the area that was studied in this research (King, 1967). She contends that poor readers tend to

have interests that are less mature than their classmates but above their reading abilities. Thus, they tend to choose books that are too difficult. She also implies that students of higher intelligence read more difficult material than their classmates because they have more mature interests. She does not tie in that concept with reading ability or with the reading level of the material. Geislin (1972) found otherwise. She used pairs of books, one preferred by eight-year-olds and one preferred by ten-year-olds. Geislin used eight-year-olds two years ahead of their classmates and twelve-year-olds two years behind their classmates. For the twelve-year-olds she again used pairs of books, one preferred by grade fives and one preferred by grade sevens. She found that interest was the key factor in book selection, and concluded that male students of eight years and twelve years were not influenced significantly by reading age or chronological age; however, girls in the twelve-year-old age group tended to choose books based on chronological age. Students in Geislin's study did not have to read the books they chose.

Lamme's study of the relationships between reading habits and abilities examines recreational reading in the same vein as many of the others. She is more concerned with the quality, quantities and types of books being read than their actual reading levels (Lamme, 1976). Lamme has relied on questionnaire surveys to obtain her data. This type of data seems to offer no proof that

the material reported read *was* read. Her method was to compare comprehension results on the Iowa Reading Comprehension Test to factors such as quantity of books read, quality of books read, percent of books chosen from the library, and so on, to a total of eighteen factors.

Mary Austin states that observations of self selecting of books showed it often led to poor choices (Austin, 1963).

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In the opinion of those teachers who allowed complete self-selection, the children chose wisely anywhere from 80 to 90 percent of the time. However, on the basis of observations and informal talks with children relative to the books they were reading, it appeared that children had often selected reading material which was more appropriate for their recreational reading level than for their instructional level. In fewer instances children were believed to be reading books too difficult for them. (P. 90)

Although Austin deals with some areas of this study, her opinions are very subjective. No research design is reported to inform the reader about such basic factors as sample size, sample selection, instrumentation and methodology. Her comments would appear to require testing in a more structured format.

Fleming's study of the ability of children to perceive the difficulty of reading materials is the one study more closely

connected with this current research (Fleming, 1967). In his study Fleming points out that the ability of students to select reading materials within their range of reading comprehension has rarely, if ever, been questioned. Fleming's analysis concluded that: there is a systematic relationship between students' reading ability and their perception of easy reading material; there is no systematic relationship between a student's level of reading comprehension and perception of difficult reading material; and, there is a relationship between students' level of reading comprehension and perception of difficult reading material. The study appears to confirm the need to question students' ability to self-select appropriate reading materials. In general his subjects were not able to differentiate reading difficulty clearly.

New Findings

The study recently completed was designed to determine the relationship between the appropriateness of book choices from the school library made by grade six students and sex, reading ability level, and choice within interest areas. The method of data collection was to use stratified random sampling to select an equal number of boys and girls throughout the total sample (N = 196). The sample was also stratified equally among three schools and three reading ability groupings. The reading ability groupings were based on the results of the Woodcock Word

Identification Test. Group one was above grade level readers (7.1+); group two was at grade level readers (6.0 - 7.0); and group three was below grade level readers (5.9-). Random sampling was used within each group. Each of the three groups was comprised of twenty-four students, twelve boys and twelve girls, for a total of seventy-two. Categories of reading ability, sex, and choice within interest area were recorded for each subject. Readability levels for the books being read by the subjects were calculated by using the Fry Readability Graph. Each of the students in the study completed an interest inventory form to determine their interest areas in reading. Within one week of the collection of this information, the books that each of the students was currently reading, selected from the school library, were collected, analyzed for readability level and returned to the individual students. After a two-week delay, each student was questioned to insure the status of the reading of the selected book. This process was repeated three times.

Results

The findings of the study were as follows:

(1) There is no significant relationship between the reading ability of sixth grade students and their choice of free reading materials at levels appropriate to their reading ability.

(2) There is no significant difference between the abilities of boys and girls in choosing free reading materials at levels

appropriate to their reading ability.

(3) There is no significant difference between students who do choose books within their stated interest areas and those who do not in their ability to choose materials at levels appropriate to their reading ability.

(4) There is no significant tendency for students to choose books with their stated interest areas in a free choice.

In essence it would appear that grade six students' reading ability is a significant factor in their ability to select appropriate reading materials. Those subjects who were above grade level in reading ability tended to choose books below their ability, while those who were below grade level chose books above their ability. Neither sex nor choice within interest area appeared to be factors in the students' ability to select appropriate reading materials.

In conclusion, grade six students in this study did not, significantly, choose books within their stated interest areas.

Implications

The results of this study raised a number of concerns of which school librarians should be aware. The first concern was that students do tend to choose books of readability levels that differ from their tested reading abilities. This tendency did not appear to be related to the factors of sex or choice within stated interest areas, but to reading grade level. Further expansion of

this observation showed that above-grade-level readers tended, but not significantly, to choose materials below their reading ability and below-grade-level readers significantly tended to choose materials above their ability. At-grade-level readers had no significant tendency in any direction. These observations may be explained by a combination of developmental stages and interest. Indeed, it may be stated that if those two factors are the key to book selection, as much of the research cited claims they are, the results of the present study would be completely expected. It must be concluded that although reading ability groups showed different tendencies in choice of appropriate reading material, there was no strong evidence that reading ability was a major factor. In other words, the limitations of the study's design, based on the independent testing instruments used, prohibit labelling reading ability as the primary factor in grade six students' self-selection of free reading materials.

Another concern would be that students did not tend to choose books within stated interest areas, although, as pointed out, that does not mean that they did not choose books of interest.

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